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Markku Sotarauta

To cite this article: Markku Sotarauta (2014) Reflections on 'Mobilizing leadership in cities and regions', *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 1:1, 28-31, DOI: [10.1080/21681376.2013.869431](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2013.869431)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2013.869431>



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Routledge



Published online: 07 Feb 2014.



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COMMENTARY

Reflections on ‘Mobilizing leadership in cities and regions’

Markku Sotarauta*

University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

Place-based leadership – understudied but important

Andrew Beer and Terry Clower, in their article ‘Mobilizing leadership in cities and regions’ in this issue, begin their important review on leadership as so many have done before them: by finding the concept enticing but elusive. Broadly speaking, leadership demands us to take a look at it again and again, in different environs and at different times. Such questions as: Do we actually need leaders? Why do some people become leaders and some others do not? How do leaders influence communities and for what? and Why do some leaders seem to produce good results while some do not? are examples that deserve to be posed repeatedly. Interestingly, these kinds of questions have raised only a limited interest in the regional studies and regional science communities.

As Beer and Clower say, the dominant regional development theories and models have recently more often than not removed purposive agency from the local/regional economic development equation. Additionally, fairly often such concepts as power and influence, or more broadly politics, are left for other disciplines to address. Therefore, the link between leadership and local/regional economic development remains something of a black box. Perhaps regional studies scholars ignore leadership and power because they do not matter much, or, more likely, we ignore them as they matter so much that we do not even dare to think about diving into the spidery webs of power and influence. Of course, these issues have been studied extensively in the past (e.g., Logan & Molotch, 1987) and there are also notable examples of renewed interest (e.g., Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010).

How to approach place-based leadership

It is easy to agree with Beer and Clower that thinking about leadership might empower us to open new horizons both in academic research on local/regional economic development and in related practices, and it is also easy to agree with their claim that there is a need for conceptual discussion on place-based leadership. Additionally, it would be more than timely to initiate a methodological discussion with the following aims: (1) rethink what we need case studies for (Flyvbjerg, 2006), (2) launch comparative case studies, and (3) reach beyond case studies and experiment with other forms of enquiry too. The methodological issues are left aside here, but a few reflections on the concept of leadership are raised instead.

*Email: markku.sotarauta@uta.fi

Beer and Clower quote Stough, DeSantis, Stimson, & Roberts (2001, p. 77) and maintain that 'leadership is the tendency of the community to collaborate in a sustained, purposeful manner to enhance economic performance or economic environment of its region', and further, quoting Stimson, Stough, & Roberts (2002, p. 279), they say that 'leadership for regional economic development will not be based on traditional hierarchical relationships; rather it will be a collective relationship between institutional actors [...]'. It would not be wise to disagree with the importance of collaboration or the importance of new modes of governance, but it might be wise to take a step or two backwards and reconsider if these notions really help us to find a root definition of place-based leadership. Of course, place-based leadership is by necessity an interdependent process, and consequently place-based leadership is usually a shared and/or dispersed process. Let us carry out a small thought experiment and change 'leadership' to 'partnership' and 'governance' and see whether the definitions would also make sense with renewed phrasing. If we defined partnership as 'the tendency of the community to collaborate' and governance by saying that 'it will not be based on traditional hierarchical relationships', all this would make a lot of sense, would it not?

How does leadership differ from partnership or governance?

In spite of the fact that collaboration emerges in many studies as crucial in place-based leadership, perhaps we ought not to define leadership through it. In certain places, at certain times, we may find a heroic leader who using a traditional hierarchy makes a difference in the community. Consequently, to find answers to the question what place-based leadership actually is, and how it plays out in different institutional contexts, we might need to adopt an alternative path to follow. Perhaps we could (1) see what the related fields might provide us with (studies on policy networks, network management and leadership in networks, for example), (2) elaborate in what ways city and regional economic development is a unique environment to study leadership, and (3) carry out both theoretical and empirical studies to find more specific definitions and insights that would fit both the differing scales and institutions of places. Perhaps, in the end, we might be able to flesh out what leadership is like in our field of enquiry and produce contingent typologies.

As the aim here is not to search for definitions but to reflect Beer and Clower's paper, it might be enough to say that leaders are actors who have a greater range of assets than others in the community for stretching beyond constraints (Samuels, 2003). Of course, a whole range of questions begins to emerge: Why do they have greater assets? What kind of local settings incubates good leaders? How do leaders use their assets and for what? How do they mobilize other actors? etc.

How does place-based leadership differ from other forms of leadership?

Business and political studies on leadership, generally speaking, tend to agree that leaders (1) have followers, (2) produce results, (3) involve and mobilize people, (4) make people work to reach and agree on goals, (5) provide the followers with a vision to work towards, and (6) build organizations where followers' capabilities are fully nurtured and used (Bennis, 1999; Drucker, 1998; Samuels, 2003; Senge, 1990; Sotarauta, 2005). Many case studies show that place-based leadership, unlike more conventional organizationally oriented leadership approaches, is by nature collective, distributed, bottom-up, facilitative and emergent. Place-based leadership is not based

only on formal positions but also on the roles actors have and/or take in the community, and the ways they behave and influence complex networks, while in organizational settings the formal position, and authority derived from it, plays a more direct role. Therefore, place-based leadership is by necessity more collective in nature as nobody usually has authority over the issues important for a respective city or region. Consequently, leadership cannot rely on control; more facilitative and generative forms of it are needed. As Beer and Clower observe, leadership is more transformational than transactional, and thus it is often difficult to say *a priori* who will take a leadership position, what it is based on and why it emerges from where it emerges.

It is the emergent property of place-based leadership that makes it so fascinating an object of study. Simultaneously, it is this very property that also warns us against adopting a prescriptive definition; it calls for a sharp root definition to work with. Otherwise, we might see what we are inclined to see but not all the nuances of leadership in practice. All this suggests that we ought also to see beyond simplified top-down and bottom-up dichotomies, as place-based leadership may be a complex ‘middle-round-up-down’ process rather than a vertical one. Consequently, many of the obvious concepts of leadership studies ought to be rethought, for example: the relationship between leaders and followers is not straightforward but ambiguous as a leader may lead some issues but end up being a follower in others, and some of the followers may in some other occasion be leaders; leaders need to reach beyond those organizations that authorize them and influence where they have no formal position to do so. Thus, leaders need also to lead other leaders, and a vision may be more a forum for discussion, or a way to learn new vocabulary and about other actors, than a first step in a formal planning procedure.

Which is worse – bad leadership or absence of leadership?

Beer and Clower make an explicit case for comparative studies on leadership in different institutional settings. Even more so the call for better understandings about leadership in different types of countries and regions is implicitly embedded in between the lines of their paper. In a way, Beer and Clower emphasize more the need to *mobilize place-based leadership* than the ways *local/regional leaders mobilize other actors and entire communities*. It may be that this tells us more about the countries the authors work and live in than place-based leadership more broadly. Obviously, liberal market economies are institutionally thinner than coordinated market economies in these respects. Additionally, as Parkinson et al. (2012) show, in centralized countries there is no space for place-based leadership to emerge and manoeuvre, and conversely more decentralized countries with strong place-based leadership capacity have shown stronger economic development and innovative capacity than the more centralized ones.

Interestingly, drawing from their experience from institutionally thin regions, Beer and Clower argue that the greatest risk for places is not poor leadership but the absence of leadership. However, we might say that some of the most notorious dictators have been effective leaders as they have mobilized entire countries to implement their vision as well as coordinated and controlled the implementation of designed plans with heavy hands. However morally appalling the visions and strategies of these dictators may have been, they have taken a leadership position, but not for good. There is a need for open, democratic place-based leadership, but we need to be aware also of bad place-based leadership, have conceptual and methodological tools for detecting it, and reveal what the outcomes of bad leadership may be without being trapped by our normative wishes. Bad leadership may be as harmful for regions as the absence of leadership.

In conclusion, Beer and Clower's contribution provides us with good food for thought, and several timely questions to work with. It would be important to shed more on leadership local/regional economic development, but if we ended up producing something useful for leadership studies too, that would be a nice bonus.

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